

ANSWERS TO TOUGH QUESTIONS ABOUT THE BIBLE

Could you defend the Bible's authority? This information will help you respond to a skeptic.

Q: Since there are so many different interpretations of the Bible, why should I believe yours?

A: One complaint we often hear is that everyone has a different interpretation of the Bible. Because many people arrive at varying conclusions when they read the Bible, there is supposedly no way to get a consensus. People point to the variety of denominations as an example that there can be no unanimity among Bible believers.

This idea neglects to take into account certain facts. The great majority of Bible readers have no problem agreeing on the Bible's central teachings. Even those who do not believe the Bible to be true have no difficulty whatsoever discerning the main message.

Within all branches of Christianity, we find the same basic understanding as to what the Bible teaches. They usually accept the same creeds that assert such basic truths as that God made man in His image, with freedom of choice, and that man chose to rebel against God, thus bringing sin into the world. And God, because of His everlasting love, became a man in the person of Jesus Christ and died a substitutionary death on our behalf, paying the penalty of sin. Men can have their relationship restored with God through placing their faith in Jesus Christ.

The Bible's message is clear for those who will read it and seek to find out its meaning. The problem comes when people attempt to make the Word fit their preconceived ideas. This is not the fault of the Bible, but of the people who force the Bible to say whatever they want it to say.

As for various denominations, it must be stressed that they are usually not formed because of division over Christianity's central teachings. The differences are a result of a variety of factors, including cultural, ethnic and social. Doctrinal differences are not always that crucial.

Some people use this argument as an excuse for not believing in Jesus, but like all others it does not prove to be valid. Jesus made the main issue crystal-clear, "He who believes in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him" (John 3:36). Often the disagreement is not so much with the interpretation of the Scriptures, but with the application.

Q: How can you believe a Bible that is full of contradictions?

A: It is truly amazing how often this question is asked. It contains the assumption that the Bible is filled with many obvious discrepancies-which, if true, would make it impossible to believe that the Bible has a divine origin.

If, indeed, the Bible does contain demonstrable errors, it would show that at least those parts could not have come from a perfect, all-knowing God. We do not argue with this conclusion, but we do disagree with the initial premise. It is very easy to accuse the Bible of inaccuracies, but it is quite another matter to prove it.

Certain passages at first glance appear to be contradictory, but further investigation will show that this is not the case. What constitutes a contradiction? The law of non contradiction, which is the basis of all logical thinking, states that a thing cannot be a and non-a at the same time. In other words, it cannot be raining and not raining at the same time.

If one can demonstrate a violation of this principle from Scripture, then and only then can he prove a contradiction. For example, if the Bible said-which it does not-that Jesus died by crucifixion both at Jerusalem and at Nazareth at the same time, this would be a provable error.

It is important to remember that two statements may differ from each other without being contradictory. Some fail to make a distinction between contradiction and difference.

For example, take the case of the blind men at Jericho. Matthew relates how two blind men met Jesus, while both Mark and Luke mention only one. However, neither statement denies the other, rather they are complementary.

Suppose you were talking to the mayor of your city and the chief of police at city hall. Later, you see your friend Jim and tell him you talked to the mayor today. An hour later, you see your friend John and tell him you talked to both the mayor and the chief of police.

The statements you actually made to Jim and John are different, but not contradictory. Likewise, many biblical statements fall into this category. Many think they find errors in passages that they have not correctly read.

In the Book of Judges we have the account of the death of Sisera. Judges 5:25-27 is supposed to represent Jael as having slain him with her hammer and tent peg while he was drinking milk. Judges 4:21 says she did it while he was asleep. However, a closer reading of Judges 5:25-27 will reveal that it is not stated that he was drinking milk at the moment of impact. Thus, the discrepancy disappears.

Sometimes two passages appear to be contradictory because the translation is not as accurate as it could be. A knowledge of the original languages of the Bible can immediately solve these difficulties, for both Greek and Hebrew-like all languages-have peculiarities that make them difficult to render into English or any other language.

A classic example concerns the accounts of Paul's conversion as recorded in the Book of Acts. Acts 9:7 (King James Version) states, "And they that were with me saw indeed the light, and were afraid; but they heard not the voice of Him that spake to me."

These statements seem contradictory; one says that Paul's companions heard a voice, while the other account says that no voice was heard. However, a knowledge of Greek solves this difficulty. As the Greek scholar, W.F. Arndt, explains in his book *Does the Bible Contradict Itself?*:

"The construction of the verb 'to hear' (akouo) is not the same in both accounts. In Acts 9:7 it is used with the genitive, in Acts 22:9 with the accusative. The construction with the genitive simply expresses that something is being heard or that certain sounds reach the ear; nothing is indicated as to whether a person understands what he hears or not.

"The construction with the accusative, however, describes a hearing which includes mental apprehension of the message spoken. From this it becomes evident that the two passages are not contradictory.

"Acts 22:9 does not deny that the associates of Paul heard certain sounds; it simply declares that they did not hear in such a way as to understand what was being said. Our English idiom in this case simply is not so expressive as the Greek" (*Does the Bible Contradict Itself?*, pp. 13,14).

It must also be stressed that when a possible explanation is given to a Bible difficulty, it is unreasonable to state that the passage contains a demonstrable error. Some difficulties in Scripture result from our inadequate knowledge about the circumstances, and do not necessarily involve an error. These only prove that we are ignorant of the background.

As historical and archaeological studies proceed, new light is being shed on difficult portions of Scripture, and many "errors" have disappeared with the new understanding. We need a wait-and-see attitude on some problems.

While all Bible difficulties have not yet been cleared up, it is our firm conviction that, as more knowledge is gained of the Bible's past, these problems will fade away. The biblical conception of God is an all-knowing, all-powerful being who does not contradict Himself, and so we feel that His Word, when properly understood, will not contradict itself.

Q: Since the New Testament was written so long after Christ's death, how can anyone trust the Gospel accounts of His life?

A: The fact of the matter is that the gospels were written by eyewitnesses or people who recorded firsthand testimony. The writers were all living at the same time these events transpired, and they had personal contact either with the events or with people who witnessed the events.

There is strong internal testimony that the Gospels were written at an early date. The Book of Acts records the missionary activity of the early church and was written as a sequel by the same person who wrote the Gospel according to Luke. The Book of Acts ends with the apostle Paul alive in Rome.

This would lead us to believe that it was written before he died, since the other major events in his life have been recorded. We have some evidence that Paul was put to death in the Neronian persecution of A.D. 64, which means the Book of Acts was composed before this time.

The Gospel of Luke, then, had to have been composed sometime before that, probably in the late 50s or early 60s of the first century. The death of Christ took place around A.D. 30, which would make the composition of Luke at the latest within 30 years of the events.

The early church generally taught that the first Gospel composed was that of Matthew, which would place us still closer to the time of Christ. This evidence leads us to believe that the first three Gospels were all composed within 30 years of the time these events occurred, a time when unfriendly eyewitnesses were still living who could contradict their testimony if it was not accurate.

This type of evidence recently led one liberal scholar, John A.T. Robinson, to redate the New Testament documents much earlier than most modern liberal scholars would have us believe. Robinson argued in *Redating the New Testament* that the entire New Testament could have been completed before A.D. 70, which is still well into the eyewitness period.,

The evidence points out that the documents were not written long after the events but within close proximity to them, and they were written by people during the period when many eyewitnesses or people acquainted with the facts were still living. The inescapable conclusion is that the New Testament picture of Christ can be trusted.

Q: Are Christians guilty of circular reasoning?

A: A charge that is frequently leveled against the Bible is that Christians argue in circles. The charge goes that Christians claim the Bible as the inspired Word of God and, as proof, quote a passage from the Bible that says so.

This type of argumentation is known as begging the question, or circular reasoning. It is based on assuming something to be true, using that assumption as fact to prove another assumption and using the "proved" assumption to prove your original assumption!

Some Christians (and many non-Christians) do argue in circles, but about the Bible they certainly don't need to.

Instead of assuming the Bible is the Word of God, we can begin by demonstrating that the Scriptures are reliable and trustworthy historical documents. This is confirmed by applying the ordinary test of historical criticism to the Scriptures.

After establishing that the Bible is a valid historical record, the next point is realizing that Jesus Christ claims to be the unique Son of God and that He bases this claim on His forthcoming resurrection from the dead.

Next, we examine the evidence for the resurrection contained in this historic document and find that the arguments overwhelmingly support the contention that Christ has risen from the dead. If this is true, then He is the unique Son of God as He claimed to be. If He is indeed God, then He speaks with authority on all matters.

Since Jesus considered the Old Testament to be the Word of God (Matthew 15:1-4; 5:17, 18) and promised His disciples, who either wrote or had control over the writing of the New Testament books, that the Holy Spirit would bring all things back to their remembrance (John 14:26), therefore we can insist, with sound and accurate logic, that the Bible is God's Word. This is not circular reasoning. It is establishing certain facts and basing conclusions on the sound, logical outcome of these facts. The case for Christianity can be established by ordinary means of historical investigation.

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